The history of the Christmas Crib

2014.12.15

Christmas devotion. I don't smile when I see you making cardboard mountains around the crib and placing simple clay figures near the manger. You have never seemed more a man to me than now, when you seem to be a child. (The Way, no. 557)

From the beginning of December, many churches and Christian family homes put up a crèche or crib representing the birth of Jesus. Some shops and businesses do the same; it is a long-standing tradition that has become part of the culture of many different countries. Whether it is a simple representation of Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus, or an elaborate series of Biblical scenes related to the birth of Christ, the crib helps people to get inside the life of Jesus Christ, as St Josemaria used to recommend. “To learn from Jesus, you must try to know his life by reading the Gospel and meditating on the scenes of the New Testament, in order to understand the divine meaning of his life on earth.” (Christ is Passing By, no. 14)

In the Catacombs
Pictures of the Virgin and Child go back to the very beginnings of Christianity. A wall-painting in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome shows the Blessed Virgin, surrounded by an aureole, holding the Child to her breast, with a prophet (possibly Isaiah) beside them. One of the interpretations of this image is that it refers to the words of Isaiah containing a prophecy of the Messiah: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a maiden shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:13-14).

Greccio and the first Christmas Crib
Greccio, Italy, Christmas, 1223. In a cave near the village, St Francis of Assisi celebrated the birth of Christ, not with figures of the people and objects, or with actors, though St Francis did use live animals.
Midnight Mass was celebrated, with a symbolic representation of the Christmas scene: a crib, with no baby in it, and an ox and a mule, based on Christian tradition and the accounts of the apocryphal gospels, as well as the passage from Isaiah that says, “The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand” (Isaiah 1:3). These animals were included in the crib scene by the fourth century AD, as shown in an image discovered in the Catacombs of St Sebastian in Rome in 1877.

After the Mass itself, St Francis sang the Gospel and preached to the congregation about the birth of Jesus in humble circumstances like those before their eyes: a cold winter night, inside a cave used as a stable for the animals which stood near the Baby and warmed him with their breath. So this first occasion was not so much a crib as a liturgical drama, but the custom rapidly spread of setting up cribs inside churches during the Christmas season, with terracotta, wax or wooden figures.

**Spread through Europe and Latin America**
From the fourteenth century onwards the tradition of building Christmas cribs became strongly established in Italy and was passed on to the rest of Europe. It started as a tradition for churches and from there was adopted by the population in general. The Franciscans were particularly responsible for spreading the custom, taking it to the Kingdom of Naples in the fifteenth century, where the figures were made of clay for the first time. Crib-making developed into an important art, especially in Portugal, in the Tyrol, and most of all in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, where it was actively patronized by Charles III de Bourbon (d. 1788). The custom of having a creche in the family home became popular in Catholic Europe after 1600, owing, it is said, to the efforts of the Capuchins. Halfway through the eighteenth century, King Charles VII of Naples became king of Spain, and encouraged the custom of Christmas cribs in Spain and Latin America. It is said that it was Moravian Germans who brought the custom to the United States.

The Napolitan cribs were as full of symbolism as their size would allow, often showing complete Biblical scenes, in order to pass on the many messages of the Redemption by the way they represented the Nativity.

**Figures and characters at the crèche**
All of mankind is represented at the crib: “Our Lord asks all men to come out to meet him, to become saints. He calls not only the Magi, the wise and powerful. Before that he had sent, not a star, but one of his angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem. Rich or poor, wise or less so, all of us have to foster in our hearts a
humble disposition that will allow us to listen to the word of God” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 33).

The figures that are indispensable are of course, St Joseph, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Baby Jesus. Then come the ox and the donkey; the angel; and the shepherds who came to adore the Child whose birth the heavenly messenger had announced to them (Lk 2:8-15).

The Three Kings have been held to represent different things at different times: one for the adoration of each member of the Blessed Trinity; the known world (so one is shown as white, one oriental, and one African); or the three ages of man (youth, maturity and old age). In any case, these three characters are based on the account given in St Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 2:1-12).